The Crazy palace: the global simulation method in classes for asylum seekers

Alessandra Castorrini – Cefal Emilia Romagna

Abstract – This paper describes an innovative approach called Global Simulation that focuses on asylum seekers' educational needs. Global simulation is a *working progress* story starting from a scenario in which each participant (including teachers) could edit the plot and insert events, details, parallel stories through the dialogical, written or transmitted form: students and teacher(s) could create/solve problems, change the main theme, and satisfy their own hidden fantasies through the creation of a new identity. In this dissertation, the goals to achieve of an intermediate level course will be presented following the directives offered by the Global Simulation. Generally, Global Simulation has been tested on literate adults and adolescents with a good previous level; consequently, the novelty of this essay is related to the use of Global Simulation with a target group composed by asylum seekers.

Participants: Asylum seekers' definition

Asylum seekers is only a label used to define people who escape from other countries (especially Asia or Africa) because of persecutions and conflicts and who arrive in Europe after a traumatic journey through the desert and the sea. UNHCR gives this definition: "*An asylum-seeker is someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed*". From the educational point of view, the main subdivision is between students with very low basic education (complete or partial illiterates) ban below the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and students with an adequate culture and with a wide linguistic repertoire. All of them are characterized by traumatic experiences and a desperate itinerary that brought them to cross the border. For this reason, they are called *vulnerable people*, but despite this expression, all these students are people with dreams, expectations and desire to learn the target language used in the host country. For this reason the traditional approaches, especially those related to outdated methodologies, have been rejected in favour of a more fun, stimulating and playful approach. These students are generally characterized by lack of concentration, poor memorization and low-level strategies. Moreover, for many of them abstract thought is impossible, so in a "normal" course teacher should always remember to focus on pragmatic contexts and close to familiar situations; for these reasons, the entire course should be conceptually accessible. In the face of this situation, the teacher should plan lessons linked to concrete needs (or perceived as concrete by his/her students). During this kind of course, the teacher should provide input related to the development of basic knowledge, language skills and strategies to gain mastery in a foreign language.

Theoretical assumptions: What is Global simulation?

Global Simulation is a medium-long duration "journey" for (re)-creating together with all the participants of a class group a certain representation of reality by a definite environment characterized by completeness and internal coherence (Montali 2014). This simulation is born from a frame (the only choice made by the teacher) and takes place in a small space, but not completely closed – for instance a building, an island, an office, a shopping centre - where everyone can take part in the story by inventing a portion of it. This narrative plot is dictated and kept alive only thanks to the imagination of the class group.

In according to this definition, Global Simulation is both an approach and a complete toolkit of techniques ready to be used, but also a working project for a conceptual syllabus (see Levine, 2004).

This approach is influenced by both the communicative and the humanistic-affective approach (in particular the Suggestopedia). As in the communicative approach, the starting point is offered by a defined and specific situation: after negotiating the spatial-temporal coordinates with the students, all the related simulations can begin. Thanks to this approach, students are encouraged to create meaningful interactions and leave away the mechanical practise. All meanings are negotiated and this approach carries out tasks, allows repairing unbroken conversations and helps to acquire learning strategies. Moreover, Global Simulation can encourage students to be more confident and to improve their communicative competence in different contexts, pretending reality. In addition, the focus is on communication functions and not on grammar (even if there could be a contrastive analysis). Jones (1984) stated that "the aim of the simulation is not to produce the correct words, grammar and pronunciation, but to communicate effectively according to roles, functions, and duties". Regarding humanistic-affective approach, shared points are the following. Students contribute to the creation of a meaningful project for themselves and consequently they are encouraged to use language in several contexts close to their own daily life trying to be as accurate as possible. On the contrary, teacher is only a *counselor*, it is not a director. Levine (2004) stated that teacher is an instructor or a controller and it "is prohibited from problem solving or decision making for the participants". The controller cannot directly correct his students' mistakes but can take note to resolve them at a later stage. Global Simulation is also a set of techniques shared with Suggestopedia: the controller should alternate rest phases and production phases, use chamber music and the

"guided meditation for lucid dreaming" to relax his/her students and to elicit written or oral texts.

For both approaches, the most important goal is to focus on acquisition of communicative competence in real life in according to students' learning styles, personality types, variety of interests (Levine 2004). Global Simulation allows increasing motivation because students can attend a complete language course. It could give a complete and communicative language-learning experience and it is related with all skills, grammar and cultural issues.

Francis Debyser and Jean-Marc Caré (1995) created a series of simulation models to be inspired by: L'Immeuble (the building), L'Ile (the island), Le Village (The village) and Le Cirque (The circus), dedicated to children. Caré and Debyser have created language courses, in which teaching activities try to define a unitary history that starts from the thoughts expressed by its participants, a sort of "open source" with the possibility of developing in a cooperative and collaborative way. Moreover, it is possible to adapt this syllable also for training language for specific purposes (LSP). These functional simulations are particularly well adapted to curricula of "specialty language class" or used to increase motivation in students who are interested in a specific professional field, especially when they need to learn a language to achieve a set of professional skills (for instance, business Italian or Italian for tourism management).

Global simulation in "pills": an ideal example of Italian course for asylum seekers

In the following section of this article, Global simulation is described beginning by its own scaffold. In Montale's (2014) conceptualization, teacher should keep in mind six points to illustrate: (1) setting & environment, (2) characters, (3) interpersonal relationship, (4) story, (5) unexpected events and (6) epilogue.

2

Setting and Environment

In the first step, the controller should set the spatial-temporal coordinates (the setting). It is necessary choosing a premise on which to base a story. This simulated environment (Levine, 2004) should be close to students' life experience or it should be considered motivating for them.

In my course, composed by an intermediate-level group of asylum seekers, the class group was interested in acquiring aspects of Italian culture lagging in formal contexts and interpersonal relationships in work environments. Furthermore, the main goal was to acquire a sectoral vocabulary linked to the financial, legal and administrative field. For all these reasons, the teacher opted for a shopping mall as simulation site. Even if Marc Augé claimed (1996) that these non-places are wide spaces in which people meet each other without entering into relationships, we consider social, friendly and working relationships that can arise between shopkeepers, employees, employers, regular customers and social implications that can generate conflicts, tensions or distensions.

The class group has chosen a shopping centre in a Northern Italian city (Milano) in which everyone had to set activities and shops and a place to live in (a building in the centre, via Internazionale 11). The students were inspired for the creation of the scenario through a set of authentic materials (Phone book, flyers and brochures, catalogues of houses and travel agencies, seedlings and city maps, video or film clips, photographs and newspaper cutters). In this first briefing phase of simulation, students received several visual and auditory inputs to work on to create descriptions of their workplace and plan the following story. In the second phase, teacher carried out a "guided meditation" for her students. The teacher asked students to arrange themselves in a circle and to close their eyes to focus on the sound of her voice; afterwards, she put relaxing chamber music, she created a peaceful and quiet environment; finally, she asked students a set of questions aimed at recreating a situation. During the third phase, students tried to write down what they have visualized. Subsequently, they were encouraged to write their own thoughts on the blackboard at the same time. In the next phase, a discussion was held *in plenum* and all mistakes were corrected in a cooperative way. Finally, all participants negotiated the choices.

Characters

The choice of the characters is also a crucial phase because it determines the behaviour and characteristics of each participant and has an influence on interpersonal relationships.

In our shopping centre, there were six shopkeepers, two permanent employees and an aspiring employee, two external collaborators, a general director and an accountant. In some simulations, there were an unscrupulous lawyer, a zealous police officer, a nosy neighbor, an eyewitness. As for the choice of location, also for the creation of characters was dedicated a day in which they followed the four steps previously illustrated (briefing, guided meditation, written elicitation and discussion *in plenum*).

At this point of the story, fixing phase is necessary. There are several useful techniques to help students get into their characters and to help other participants memorize the essential characteristics of each other: Communicative Pattern drills (games), «skeletons in the closet», «a year ago at this time», posters.

Interpersonal relationship

During this fundamental phase, the class group should decide interpersonal relationships among the participants. The teacher draws a sociogram on the blackboard and delivers a card with a sentiment and a letter to each student; the instructions given to students concern a positive, a negative or a neutral feeling. The sociogram is a graph drawing

which, through a series of points and lines, represents the social links between participants in a group situation.

In this model of simulation, the teacher has distributed fifteen cards with a specific state of mind. The students had to choose a partner to entrust that feeling and they had to invent together an explanation to justify their own mood towards that person.

Story

This part is completely defined by the students' imagination. Teacher may provide only some suggestions on the blackboard. The beginning project may change by the conscious choices of students.

In the case of simulation at the shopping centre, the students represented animated discussions on different topics: the match of the day before (small talk), a commercial proposal, the price of a shop, the imminent opening, the organization of the works, annoying noises. The participants also used technological supports such as their own mobile phones to record voice audio or to send messages to organize events, plan strategies, fix or cancel appointments.

Thanks to these parallel situations, the plot becomes increasingly rich in details and becomes more complicated due to an unexpected event.

Unexpected events

The unexpected event is a diversion used to create suspense and tension. It allows students to be more involved in the story and to achieve a better situation starting from a bad premise. The teacher inserts this turning point in order to ask his/her students to write the chapters of a novel in a collaborative and collaborative way. He/she can provide different solutions and the majority of the class group decides the most appropriate choice.

In the descripted simulation, teacher offered two possibilities: a theft at the mall or an accident at the workplace. The students argued animatedly and chose the first option, which involved into five chapters: (1) background, (2) evidence, (3) the damage is done, (4) an identikit and (5) epilogue. The teacher divided the group class into five couples; subsequently, each couple read and corrected another text; finally, each group presented a chapter. The class group decided to simulate the entire novel and each participant took part in the group simulation. The "actors" used costumes and props (sunglasses, ties, a fake wad, a briefcase, a balaclava, etc.).

Epilogue

This part marks the end of the simulation. Generally, it moves the situation in a possible future; teacher asks the participants to decide an end to their project. Happy or unhappy endings may be accepted or students may hypothesize a probable future (it all depends also on the communicative functions and grammatical forms that the students should use). Consequentially, there is a debriefing phase in which every participants analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the path they have just experienced. Each student expresses his or her point of view either publicly or in an anonymous, written or oral form. The teacher may prepare satisfaction surveys to receive accurate feedback and the approval rating of this kind of course.

Conclusion

In this article, Global Simulation has been presented as a good alternative to outdated approaches. Global Simulation can foster active participation from the students.

Thanks to its holistic nature, students may improve all their abilities in the four skills: reading (when teacher provides a scenario, he/she gives also some visual inputs to analyse: for instance,

newspaper cutters, catalogues, letters, books, etc.), writing (during the entire simulation, teacher may ask the students to solve problems in written form: they are encouraged to produce letters, e-mails, cards, posters, novels, etc.), listening (it is necessary to listen for understanding instructions, tasks, other opinions, etc.) and speaking (this is the most remarkable ability because each participant interacts with the rest of the class group).

In this approach, the focus is not on grammar, but a good teacher should dedicate last part of the lesson to a Focus on Form or to a contrastive analysis because these instruments could be an incentive for learning; moreover, they could prevent future mistakes or clarify any widespread doubts. The experimental observations show a general improvement in communicative fluency, grammatical accuracy and a good acquisition of incidental vocabulary. It should to be underlined that Global Simulation may be a perfect vehicle to create a multi-cultural learning environment and increases the number of known words.

Satisfaction surveys states that students remember this experience with excitement (Global Simulation is approved by 90% of students). Many informants emphasize the possibility of learning in a more active and interesting way (about 65%), others remember the possibility of being free to express themselves without fear of being correct or losing face (25%), only a small part of them consider the experience fun but not very useful for acquisition (less than 10%).

As weaknesses, the following points should be noted. First, it is not possible for a Global Simulation course to completely replace a syllabus, because although structured, a global simulation course identifies medium-term goals. Moreover, if a course were all structured on Global Simulation, students could lose interest or be less involved in the provided scenario. The teacher should be very prepared and have thought about all the lessons to propose (only the students can improvise). Finally,

especially with difficult class groups or with specific problems, some phases of the simulation should be carefully chosen and the presence of a psychologist may help to prevent complicated situations.

References

BALBONI, P. (1992), «Teoria, approccio, metodo e tecnica in glottodidattica», in "Scuola e lingue moderne", XXX, 1, pp. 6-11.

BALBONI, P. (1998), Tecniche glottodidattiche per l'educazione linguistica. Italiano, lingue straniere, lingue classiche, UTET Università, Torino.

BALBONI, P. (2012), Le sfide di Babele. Insegnare le lingue nelle società complesse, 3a edizione, UTET Università, Torino.

BALBONI, P. (2013), Fare educazione linguistica. Insegnare italiano, lingue straniere e lingue classiche, De Agostini Scuola, Novara.

CARÉ, J.M. (1995), Inventer pour apprendre: Les simulation globales. Die neueren Sprachen, 94 (1), 69-87.

JONES, K. (1984), Simulation in language teaching, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

LEVINE, G. (2004), Global Simulation: A student-centered, task-based format for Intermediate Foreign Language Courses, University of California, Irvine

MONTALI, S. (2016), Italiano con L'immaginario. Tre canovacci di simulazione globale, 2a edizione, BU. Press, Bolzano.

UNHCR website: http://www.unhcr.org/asylum-seekers.html